

**Benjamin H. Latrobe, Surveyor of the Public Buildings
to Thomas Jefferson, August 13, 1807, Partial
Transcription Available, from Thomas Jefferson and the
National Capital. Edited by Saul K. Padover.**

Latrobe to Jefferson

Washington, August 13, 1807.

THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

My whole time, excepting a few hours now and then devoted to the President's house, is occupied with drawing and directions for the north wing, in the arrangements for which I am pursuing the eventual plan approved and presented by you to Congress at the last session, and in pushing on the work of the south wing. But I am again almost in despair about the roof. We had a gentle northeast storm without much wind, but with a persevering rain of thirty-six hours. It began on Wednesday evening and did not cease raining till Friday morning (yesterday). I was often under the roof and upon it during this time, and must say

that the leakage was such that Congress could not have sat either on Thursday or Friday in the room. And what is as bad as the leakage, the ceiling is stained all over, and the entablature of the colonnade is in some places black with the water soaking through the ribs and receiving iron from the numerous nails. Yesterday I took off one of the strips which cover the joints, and discovered one cause of leakages.

It is now too late to make experiments. Nothing appears clearer to me than that we are in a situation in which there is no room to deliberate on the cost of any method whatsoever

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which to common sense and experience appears effectual. To place Congress at its next session under a leaky roof would be considered almost an insult to the Legislature after what passed at the last session. Of the total destruction of my individual reputation, of the personal disgrace I should incur after the censure implied by my reports of my predecessors, I say nothing. I dare not think of it. It would drive me, who have never yet failed in any professional attempt, to despair. But there are public considerations which

seem to involve higher interests. Your administration, sir, in respect of public works, has hitherto claims of gratitude and respect from the public and from posterity. It is not flattery to say that you have planted the arts in your country. The works already erected in this city are the monuments of your judgment and of your zeal and of your taste. The first sculpture that adorns an American public building perpetuates your love and your protection of the fine arts. As for myself, I am not ashamed to say that my pride is not a little flattered and my professional ambition roused when I think that my grandchildren may at some future day read that after the turbulence of revolution and of faction which characterized the two first presidencies, their ancestor was the instrument in your hands to decorate the tranquillity, the prosperity, and the happiness of your government. Under this stimulus I have acted, and I hope, by the character of what I have executed hitherto under your orders, obtained an influence over the feelings and opinions of Congress, which, without some fatal disaster or miscarriage, would insure the progress and completion of all your

objects of which you can make me the instrument. But I am now in despair. The next session is to decide not my fate only, but the whole dependence which Congress shall in future place upon anything which may be proposed by you on the subject of public works. My former representations on the certain event of the panel lights prove that I am not now attempting by flattery to obtain the prevalence of my individual opinions. How unworthy of all your kindness and confidence should I be, could I for a moment degrade myself and insult you by insincerity. If I offend it will be by too indiscreetly laying before the Chief

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Magistrate of the Union, the nervous, irritable, and perhaps petulant feelings of an artist. But you will forgive me for the sake of my candor.

I have strayed from my subject to represent my feelings.

I cannot add any consideration to what I have said which will not occur to you, and I beg you will have the goodness to give me as early a decision as convenient to you, that we may proceed to work.

I cannot help thinking that it would be highly useful to present to Congress fair drawings of the Senate chamber, etc., as proposed to be executed. It would probably be the means of carrying the point, and perhaps progressing with the center. I am at present entirely without a clerk. Might I engage the assistance of a clerk, for my time is so wholly occupied that it is scarcely possible for me to take the necessary rest, and the most pressing engagements of the *practical* execution are such that I can only make the working drawings, and that at home and in the evenings?

[B. H. Latrobe]

[THE JOURNAL OF LATROBE, pp. 141–44.]